

Palisades Branch Library Teen Council Hosts Virtual Mental Health Check-In

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The Teen Council meets in February for a NAMI presentation on mental health. Photo courtesy of Jessica Levy

By JENNIKA INGRAM | *Reporter*

The Palisades Branch Library Teen Council partnered with the National Alliance on Mental Health to host a free virtual event at the start of April.

In a presentation titled “End of Silence,” West Los Angeles NAMI Program Coordinator Tim Davis, along with several young adult guests who experience mental health conditions such as

anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder, shared stories in an effort to de-stigmatize and engage teens about these conditions. Participants were also able to ask questions.

The event took place online after school hours, and teens who are not currently library volunteers were able to use the opportunity to gain community service hours for their attendance and participation.

Approximately 50 people joined the virtual forum. Half were teenagers and the other half librarians throughout the city of Los Angeles.

“Now that I’ve seen the presentation twice, one of the most interesting differences I noticed is that the virtual aspect made it easier, in some ways, for the teens to participate,” Youth Librarian at Palisades Branch Library Jessica Levy told the *Palisadian-Post*. “Teens were not shy about asking questions, whether through the written chat or by talking over the mic. In-person, it seems like teens may feel more self-conscious about speaking up.”

In order to maintain everyone's privacy, the presentation was not recorded.

Since December 2019, the Teen Council has been working on an initiative called Teens Leading Change and named their project Neurominded.

"It's a way to receive recognition, and possibly funding, to support the work that the teens want to do," Levy explained. "The teens named their project Neurominded, recognizing that a lot of their peers experience anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions that may not be present on the surface."

Levy has worked at the library for three years, and serves as a leader, mentor and guide for the teens.

"The teens are working on a civic engagement project focused on mental health," Levy said, "and now they're turning their attention to mental health among peers during the COVID public health crisis."

State Senator Portantino proposed legislation for California, SB 849, which would amend the Education Code that covers Pupil Attendance in state schools and allow mental health to be considered a reason for an excused absence in high school.

"We were working in support of this legislation," Levy explained.

The teens created a letter-writing campaign and called each member of that State Senate Committee in early March during the commenting period to urge them to support this legislation.

A week later over email, Senator Richard Pan's assistant thanked the teens for their support of the bill and their advocacy work.

The next step in the legislative process is normally when the bill is heard by the State Senate Committee on Education: It's not clear with COVID-19 if this will be suspended in the near future.

During the pandemic, members of the Teen Council are working on submitting photos and short videos (15 seconds) showing positive ways they are staying well, mentally and physically.

"We are inviting contributions," Levy said, encouraging teens in the Palisades to submit.

Over the course of the past three weeks, the Teen Council created a list of ideas for staying healthy, such as keeping a routine, trying to keep things as normal as possible under the circumstances, eating healthy, exercising, various yoga and meditation options, as well as reading a lot.

Levy added, of course, the library can provide access to some of those things virtually, as far as reading and entertainment.

The Teen Council, typically a group of 10 to 15 participants, is open to teens ages 14 to 18 years old. The group meets on Thursdays from 3:30 to 5 p.m., with online meetings during the month of April. Volunteer hours are credited after an approved application.